

## Growing Up in Tientsin, 1912–1922

In October 1912, Dr Peake was ordered to North China to run the MacKenzie Memorial Hospital in Tientsin (*Tianjin*). It was not a pleasant move; he and Beth would gladly have stayed in Hunan, and their colleagues were keen to keep them, too. They found it all the harder to quit the station they had built themselves when the hospital at Tientsin was not an attractive

proposition. During the prolonged absence of Dr Peake's predecessor, the medical standard and the very fabric of the hospital had declined deplorably. When he arrived Dr Peake had to dismiss virtually all the staff and start anew. He would have liked to do the same with the buildings, but the MacKenzie Hospital was financed by locally raised money; the LMS paid only the head doctor's salary. Taking over this post filled him with dismay, for he could see little chance of making a success of it.

They were also worried about making a 1,600-kilometre (1,000-mile) journey with little Mervyn, who was not strong, at such an unfavourable time of year; furs alone cost them a small fortune. None the less, despite a storm on the Tung-Ting Lake which immobilized them for several days, they made it first to Hankow by steamer and then, after picking up Lonnie who had been at school in Kuling, by train to Tientsin, arriving at the end of November. The cold was bitter, and at first they suffered much from the change of climate, but ultimately the dry air of Tientsin was healthier than the humidity of Hengchow. However, two weeks after their arrival Mrs Peake caught typhus from a patient, and for many days she was at death's door. As she recovered, they looked forward to their furlough, due in March 1914, only to learn that the LMS was postponing all leave by twelve months. Such was their resilience and their faith in their work that Dr Peake could report in November 1913 that they were very happy in Tientsin and felt they were in the right place.

Thus the first home that Mervyn could remember was the hospital complex at Tientsin. As in other Treaty Ports, large areas of land adjoining the city were leased to foreign powers, which administered them under their own national laws. The MacKenzie Memorial Hospital on the Taku Road was in the French Concession, in a walled compound of its own. For the young Mervyn, that compound – 'six acres of dusty ground' – was his world, his arena, and outside it was 'China, the camels, and the sickly sweets, the mules and the beggars with alizarin

wounds'. As in *Gormenghast*, the emphasis is on enclosure, with different people and a different culture beyond the wall. Alongside such civilized comforts as tennis courts, there was a crown-of-thorns tree (*Ziziphus spina-christi*) in the compound. Mervyn 'would climb to the top of its dangerous branches and there with a thorn on the bridge of his nose [he] would become the loftiest of all the unicorns' (*PS*, 2007; 10: 3, 3).

In addition to the hospital buildings there was a line of six grey-stone houses for the European missionaries, built in a style known locally as 'Tientsin Gothic' that was completely out of place in China; their very alignment was incongruous. In retrospect Mervyn thought it looked as if the whole row had been flown in straight from Croydon (where his mother went to school and where Mervyn attended art college) and had no business to be in China at all. Although the houses were outwardly similar, each had its own feel, its own smell, so that to Mervyn they differed from one another as greatly as a dog from a frog or a pig from a cat. He lived in the fourth house down, at the tennis-court end of the compound, and thirty years later he remembered it still with great affection. However, the autobiographical notes that he made in the early 1950s (printed in *Peake's Progress*, pp.471–87) rapidly decline into lists of single words and phrases. Of the house, he jotted down 'Under the stairs' and 'The attic', both typical sites of infant exploration. Both are significant sites in his novels, too, Fuchsia's private domain being her attic;<sup>1</sup> the counterpart for Titus are the stairs he discovers at the end of chapter 9 of *Gormenghast* (p.30).

However, Mervyn was not to remain in Tientsin for long: to the Peakes' surprise furlough was suddenly granted. It was too late to book steamer passages, so they took the Trans-Siberian Railway and arrived in London in May 1914. At one point during this twelve-day journey Lonnie descended alone from the train at a halt and was hauled back on again by his father just as the train was pulling out, an episode that made a deep impression on Mervyn. Lonnie, on the other hand, recalled that what had most interested Mervyn on the trip was a glass-topped case

of multi-coloured stones that his mother bought him at a wayside station (*MPR*, 1978; 7: 7). This fascination with colour is reflected in *Gormenghast*, when Titus 'sees' colour for the first time, particularly in his 'glass marble ... with its swirling spirals of rainbow colours twisted within the clear, cold white glass' (*G*, p.84).

They had returned from a country recovering from revolution to a continent rushing to war. Dr Peake's first priority was to bring his medical knowledge up to date: running a hospital that treated 30,000 outpatients a year required a great deal of him. So he returned to Edinburgh and passed his MD examinations in June 1915. Then the war caught up with him and he was commissioned in the Royal Army Medical Corps. The *LMS Chronicle* printed a photograph of him looking after recruits on Salisbury Plain – as he no doubt reminded his son during the Second World War when Mervyn was posted to Salisbury Plain for a course in the use of the theodolite. Thereafter Dr Peake was briefly posted to a field hospital in Belgium where he discovered to his surprise that the matron was his sister Grace (*Watney*, p.22).

For his family Dr Peake had rented a house in Clarence Road, Mottingham, near Eltham,<sup>2</sup> so that Lonnie could attend Eltham College as a day boy. Mervyn remained at home, too young for school, spending his time drawing and colouring sheets of paper. His talent was beginning to emerge. On this visit to England, Mrs Peake met her in-laws for the first time and Mervyn and Lonnie discovered their grandparents and their uncle George and his wife. All four had retired from the LMS on grounds of ill health and settled in Dorset.

It was October 1916 when they set off again for China and not without apprehension: German submarines had started sinking passenger ships, and missionaries had been lost on their way to and from their stations. So the Peakes took the safer route round the Cape, passing close to Madagascar where many of the Peake family had laboured for so many years. It took exactly two months to reach Tientsin. Coming straight from

the tropics to the icy winds of North China, both Lonnie and Mervyn went down at once with colds and bronchitis. That winter saw the start of a ten-year worldwide epidemic of sleeping sickness (*Encephalitis lethargica*); John Watney suggested that after lying dormant in Mervyn for forty years this disease may have caused his twelve-year decline to death. However, there is no evidence that Mervyn ever contracted sleeping sickness, and in any case the relationship that was once believed to exist between it and Parkinson's disease – which Mervyn did suffer from in his last years – has now been thoroughly disproved.<sup>3</sup>

The boys soon recovered, and Lonnie was sent off to a 'pretty grim' boarding-school 800 kilometres (500 miles) away by train at Chefoo (*Yantai*) on the coast (letter from Lonnie to GPW dated 9 January 1978). Mervyn and his parents settled down to the varied routine of hospital life. And more variety was soon to come. Having lived in the Yangtze basin they were no strangers to flooding, but they hardly expected to experience it in the plains of the north. Yet in July 1917 heavy rain caused flooding in the neighbourhood of Tientsin; the waters persisted for weeks to the extent that the Tientsin–Pukou railway line was still covered to a depth of over a metre at the end of August. The city itself was spared, however, until the third week of September when catastrophic rainfall caused all the rivers to flood again, and the Chinese town was inundated. Much of the population fled to the hills; others took refuge in sampans and junks. Still the waters rose until the foreign concessions, built on higher ground, were also awash. In the British Concession it was up to two metres (six feet) deep on 25 September, but it did not interfere unduly with work in the MacKenzie Hospital in the French Concession, where the lowest floors remained just above the water.

The floods were slow to go down because the railway embankment close to Tientsin retained the water, and there was much debate as to how and where it should be breached. On 27 October the *North China Herald* reported gloomily:

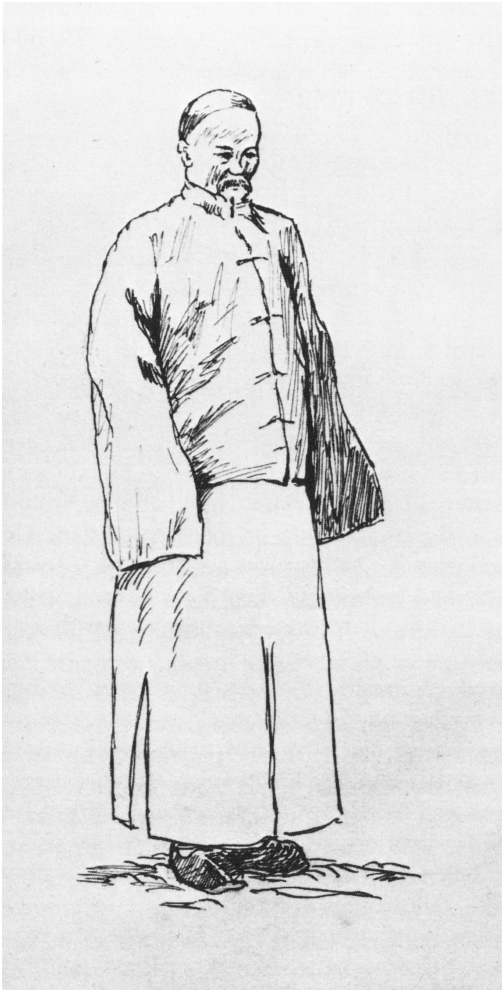


Floating islands (undated, but early)

‘Tientsin stands at the edge of an inland sea estimated to extend for 15,000 square miles [38,850 square kilometres], the draining of which there is no possible hope until the spring.’ So the memorable flooding of Gormenghast had an actual precedent in Mervyn’s life, on a scale commensurate with his

description of it. It is one of the few identifiable episodes recorded in his notes for an autobiography. What struck him particularly were the naked 'Adams', men who made a living by helping people across the floodwaters, linking their arms over each other's shoulders to form a human chain (*PP*, p.482).

Having noticed this parallel between Mervyn's life and events in Gormenghast, we might compare the setting of the castle with the geographical situation of Tientsin. Gormenghast's dominion extends 'in the north to the wastelands, in the south



An early drawing of a mandarin

to the grey salt marshes, in the east to the quicksands and the tideless sea, and in the west to knuckles of endless rock' (*TG*, p.305). Tientsin is close enough to 'the wastelands' of the Gobi desert in the north to suffer from sandstorms. The Gulf of Chihli, which lies just 65 kilometres (40 miles) east of Tientsin, is a shallow and to all intents and purposes 'tideless' sea, little more than a large bay of the Yellow Sea. Its coast is flat and swampy, with 'grey salt marshes' created by the alluvial deposits of the major rivers flowing into it. The 'knuckles of endless rock' in the west would correspond to the

Himalayas and the Sinkiang. So when Mervyn imagined where Gormenghast might be, he drew – consciously or not – on the main geographical features of the area where he spent his earliest years.

In the mission hospital compound, the young Mervyn inevitably spent much time with the Chinese domestic staff – amah, cookie, number one and number two boys, coolies and others. He got on well with them and retained some vivid memories, particularly of Ta-Tze-Fu, the cook, and ‘the way he killed hens and peeled sticks’ (*PP*, p.478). He also played with the few other boys of about his age, both Chinese and European. Once he went to the ‘fantastic, tawdry gaudy muddle of a flat’ where a ‘particularly dirty’ Russian boy from his school lived with his father. On another occasion, on his way to a polite tea party in the same part of town, he saw the boy climbing up ‘an enormous Venetian blind . . . and whooping’ (*PP*, p.474). He rather admired such lack of inhibition.

A rare glimpse of Mervyn is provided by Andrew Murray, also the son of missionary parents, who became a well-known painter of greeting cards.<sup>4</sup> ‘We used to play together, climbing trees and along the compound wall. Mervyn was always very kind and friendly to me, though I was much younger. One day he found me drawing a ship sailing through the sea. I had drawn the waves with curved, rounded tops; he suggested they would look better with pointed crests. Ever since I have put pointed tops to waves when I draw them’ (*MPR*, 1980; 11: 7).

This neatly characterizes Mervyn (as well as Andrew Murray, with his wry humour): his unfailing kindness, even as a small boy, his artist’s eye and his ability to communicate his way of seeing. At this time, too, according to Laura Beckingsale, a teaching missionary and frequent companion of the Peakes in Tientsin,

Mervyn simply drew, all the time. He hardly ever looked up from the table. A most extraordinary little boy. And then his mother wanted to clear the table . . . and he was most indignant when he had to take [away] all these scraps of paper on which he was drawing. And the



moment tea was over he was back there again with them. It was difficult to get him to bed simply because he stuck to this drawing. (Batchelor, p.111)

He was reading for himself, too, and in the shade of the crown-of-thorns tree in the compound he discovered *Treasure Island*, which he enjoyed so much that he learned much of it almost by heart (*PP*, p.477). In later years the family invented a game: one of them would quote a line from *Treasure Island* and the others had to identify the speaker and the circumstances. Otherwise Mervyn was not a scholarly child and never distinguished himself at school. In the books that reproduce his handwriting, such as *Captain Slaughterboard*, or his typing, such as *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, his spelling is erratic and he invariably misplaced the apostrophe in such contractions as ‘don’t’.

In Tientsin he attended the grammar school in the British Concession, riding to it on a donkey at first and later on a bicycle. In Mervyn’s memory it was as out of place as the houses in the compound, ‘horrid and ugly among the sweetstalls on the wide road’. For him its windows shouted, ‘I know I’m ugly, and I like it.’ Most of the teachers were women, but there was ‘a sprightly devil-may-care sort of man who took Latin, whom we could see the headmaster and his lady staff thought too flippant’ (*PP*, p.474–5). He particularly resented the irrelevance of its teaching to the life he was living: outside the rickshaws would rattle by in the street while he was trying to remember the name of the longest river in England. And when you’ve been on the Yangtze, the longest river in England is a mere trickle. In fact England itself ‘was as faint and far as the echo of a rumour’, as he put it later (*PS*, 2007; 10: 3, 3).

One day, while riding to school, he put out his hand to stroke a camel. A coolie intervened just in time, and for ever after Mervyn could hear the sound of those teeth as they met where his hand had just been. The potentially fatal nature of such an accident is recalled when the eponymous Mr Pye offers a horse some fruitdrops: its lips ‘curled back to reveal two rows of such

dreadful yellow tombstones that Mr Pye withdrew his hand at once' (*Mr Pye*, p.23). The relief that Mervyn felt remained with him, too; as a grown man, whenever he felt the need for a little humour he would bring the camel into the conversation, ordering camel stew at a Lyons Corner House or saying, to a couple who had just given him directions in the street, 'Oh, if I'd known, I would have brought my camel.' Camels also crop up in his drawings and nonsense poems.

Living so close to the hospital where his father worked, Mervyn was inevitably confronted with some of the more uncomfortable realities that are usually hidden from children: suffering, sickness, disease and death. In his notes for an autobiography he describes one case that, from what I have seen in Dr Peake's reports, was undoubtedly unique but not untypical. A girl who had been picking melons was brought in with black bands all over her body as a result of snake bites. To help her breathe she was given a tracheotomy, but she was so frightened that it took two girls to hold her down. As she struggled, the little tube in her throat kept popping out of place, which caused her to make terrible noises. It would appear that she survived, however, and thanked everybody afterwards very cheerfully. Others were not so fortunate. They would come in with bullet wounds inflicted by the roving bands of armed brigands (mostly deserters from the army) or with horrendous injuries caused when their pigtails or loose clothes were caught by the unfamiliar machinery that was now being imported. The railway alone was responsible for numerous accidents: the Chinese would leap off moving trains, expecting to land on their feet, and end up with multiple fractures. Others lost limbs while resting from the heat under railway wagons that suddenly started to move. Mervyn would be spared nothing of the sight as they were brought in on wheelbarrows or in makeshift hammocks slung from poles. Nor did he seek to avoid it. On one occasion he surreptitiously witnessed his father amputating a boy's leg and then, as the limb was carried off, fainted and fell to the floor. The fall was memorable: it



Undated family photograph

apparently inspired a scene in *Titus Alone*. Dr Peake described the case in detail in his annual report and again in his memoirs; it also features in Mervyn's very first publication.

He was a reader of *News from Afar*, a monthly magazine for children issued by the LMS; it contained edifying anecdotes and news from missionaries in the field, stories, games to play and exhortations to collect more money for mission funds. In

the early years of the century there were frequent contributions about the lives of missionaries and their children; Lonnie once featured in a piece about 'LMS Children in Central China', next-to-last in a line-up of ten toddlers photographed in Kuling in the summer of 1907. The second decade of the century saw few such articles (so there is no corresponding photograph of little Mervyn), but monthly competitions were instituted. Owing to the long time-lag between publication and the receipt of responses from children in distant parts, participation was at first limited to children living in the British Isles. At the end of 1921 this restriction was lifted, and in May 1922 'Uncle Jim's postbag' contained entries from three new 'nieces and nephews', two in China and one in Canada. Presenting them, Uncle Jim committed a dreadful *faux pas*: 'Mervyn Peake is another new niece who belongs to a famous missionary family. She is ten and likes drawing. Some day Mervyn must send us a picture for *News from Afar*.'

The May issue will have reached Tientsin two months later, in time for Mervyn's eleventh birthday. Did he write to protest? Uncle Jim did not print a correction, but in November he reported, 'Another nephew, Mervyn Peake of Tientsin, is coming home to England to go to school. He sends me a nice letter about three Chinese boys in his father's hospital in China. Mr Editor will please print the story and the picture which Mervyn drew to go with it.' Mr Editor was happy to comply and printed them both on page 172 under the title 'A Letter from China by Mervyn Peake'. (Both the letter and the rather scratchy little sketch that accompanied it, depicting three Chinese boys on crutches in front of the hospital building, are reproduced in *MPMA*, p.25.)